

From Russia with Admiration

The Happy Islands of Aotearoa: A Russian story of early New Zealand

It is not only American billionaires who are attracted to New Zealand's remoteness, hoping to escape the apocalypse. Rudyard Kipling famously, at least for New Zealanders, finished his *Song of the Cities* of 1896 with a verse on Auckland.

*Last, loneliest, loveliest, exquisite, apart--
On us, on us the unswerving season smiles,
Who wonder 'mid our fern why men depart
To seek the Happy Isles!*

It comes after Hobart ('*man's hate made me Hell*'), concluding a swing through the cities of the Empire starting with Bombay ('*I the Queen fronting thy richest sea with richer hands*'). He has each city speak, and with Auckland, there was no further city to record. He was only 24 when he visited five years earlier, so might be excused the enthusiasm of a young man in love with the Empire.

He wasn't the first to dwell on the remoteness of the country; ask the earlier immigrants on their three to six month voyage out. If you read through Anthony Trollope's Palliser and Barsetshire novels, you will find that he has on occasion used New Zealand as a threatened destination for young second sons with few prospects to travel to with a penniless wife, or somewhere to send black sheep or defrauding rogues. The author himself had travelled through the country and wrote on it in the 1870s.¹ And in a nice reverse twist of the global separation, Macauley in 1840 had a New Zealander standing on a broken London Bridge, surveying a London in ruins. This image by Macauley has been much written about², not least by William Colenso, who got a bit cross about it in 1883.³ Views of New Zealand at the time however, were not always favourable. Anton Chekhov in a quick aside called it a place of barbarity⁴ and Jules Verne, focusing on the Auckland Islands, described it as a wild and savage place⁵. The latter was translated into Russian in 1873 and remained popular in Russia, even as late as 1936 when it was made into a film.

Perhaps the most unusual piece of literature that uses Aotearoa's remoteness as a central, in this case political, effect comes from an unsuspecting source, Russia. In 1904, the prominent Ukrainian writer, Sofia Fedorivna Rusova, published a short piece of fiction, about a young man called Levko who sails in a ship from Odessa to see life in New Zealand.

Sofia Fedorivna Rusova (1856–1940) was a leading figure in the Ukraine Ministry of Education, a political activist, particularly in the Ukrainian Party of Socialist Revolutionaries, a vocal proponent of women's rights, and a writer of books



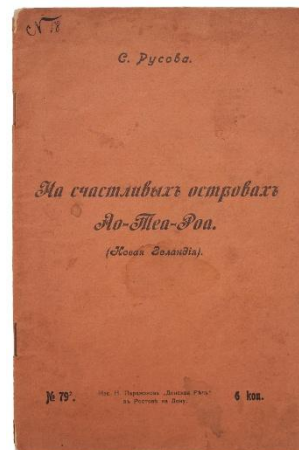
Sofia Fedorivna Rusova, 1856–1940. Internet Encyclopedia of Ukraine

on education.⁶ Her short book on Aotearoa was published in Rostov-on-Don in the Ukraine in 1904.

Rusova, S *Na schastlivikh ostrovah Ao-Tea-Roa (Novaia Zelandiya) Rostov-On-Don, D. Paramonov, 1904.*

52 pp., 4 illustrations, issued in a stapled brown paper cover. Bagnall R1169A

The book, very rarely seen, was translated by the New Zealand expert on Russia-New Zealand literary relations, John Goodliffe (1929-2010), at the University of Canterbury. He published a commentary on Rusovsa's book, along with others that reference New Zealand, in 1992, including translated excerpts. Prior to this he had published two articles on the same theme, including much information on books on New Zealand written by Russians, or by others that were common or popular with the Russian reader around the turn of the century.⁷



Goodliffe's translation and commentary are used in what follows. Firstly, on a preliminary page, Rusova lists eight sources which are worth a description.

Mizhuev, Pavel Gregorevich. *Peredovaia demokratiia sovremennago mira. Angliiskaia koloniia: novaia Zelandiia. S. Petersburg. Izd. Ts. Kraiz. [1901]. Bagnall M1814. [Mizhuev in Bagnall].* This went through 4 editions through to 1907. Goodliffe translates the title as 'The Foremost Democracy of the Modern World - the English Colony of New Zealand'. Mizhuez uses whole sections of Pember Reeves' *The Long White Cloud*, and given Goodliffe's conclusion that there was no Russian translation of Reeves book, Rusova either acknowledged Reeves through Mizhuez's book, or used the original English copy. Goodliffe (1979) provides considerable detail on Mizhuev's work [spelling his name as Mizhuyev], which was admiring of the social democracy that Richard Seddon and his Liberal Party were instituting over the years 1893 to his death in 1906. Mizhuev (1861-1832) was a leading historian of British, and more generally, Western democracies and social systems.

Reclus, Élisée. *Nouvelle géographie universelle. La Terre et les hommes. 19 vols. Paris, Hachette et Cie -1894, 1876-1894. Reclus (1830-1905) was a prominent French geographer and anarchist. New Zealand was included in vol. 14, Océan et Terres Océaniques. A Russian translation was published in St Petersburg between 1877 and 1896. Reclus, like Mizhuev, never visited New Zealand.*

Reeves, William Pember. *The Long White Cloud – Ao Tea Roa. London, Horace Marshall, 1898. Bagnall R399.* As mentioned, Rusova seems to have accessed Reeves through Mizhuev. Bagnall gives two pamphlets by Reeves translated into Russian, on women's rights and suffrage, but they date from 1905 (Bagnall R408, R415), presumably too late for Rusova, though immediate to her interests. Rusova also used Reeves' terminology of Ao Tea Roa (the words separated) in her title.

Satchell, William. *The Land of the Lost; a tale of the New Zealand gum country. London, Methuen, 1902 Bagnall S196.* We can only assume that this is the book cited by Rusova. All Satchell's other works were published at later dates. There is also an episode in Rusova's book where Levko's uncle (who is hosting him) tells of his experiences gum digging in the North, and later, the two Russians travel north to the Kauri forests and a significant meeting with Māori. There is no record of Satchell's

book being translated, so Rusova's access is not easily explained. His other works post-date Rusova's book.

Hochstetter, Ferdinand von. *Neu-Seeland.* Stuttgart. Cotta'scher Verlag. 1863. *New Zealand, its Physical Geography, Geology and Natural History.* Stuttgart, 1863. Bagnall 2626. An English translation (*New Zealand, its physical geography, geology and natural history, with special reference to the results of Government expeditions in the provinces of Auckland and Nelson*) was published in 1867 by the same publisher. There was no Russian translation, though excerpts and illustrations did appear in an article, 'Voyage a la Nouvelle-Zelande' Hochstetter published in the French journal 'Le tour du monde...' vol. XI, 1er. semestre 1865.

Leroy-Beaulieu, Pierre. *Les Nouvelles sociétés anglo-saxonnes. Australie - Nouvelle-Zélande,- Afrique australe.* Paris, Armand Colin et Cie, 1897. Bagnall L387. Russian translation: *Novye anglosakonie obshchestva: Avstraliia, Novaiia Zelandiia, IUzhnaia Afrika.* St Petersburg, Pantelev, 1898. An economist, Leroy-Bealieu (1843-1916) visited New Zealand in 1895-6 and took a conservative view, including regarding women's suffrage and the feminist movement as something of a political hoax, not a view that Rusova would have found compatible. The Russian translation would have been available to Rusova.

Ségur, Victor-Henri-Gaston, Comte de. *Au bout du monde. Une saison en Nouvelle Zelande.* Paris, Libraire Plon, Plon-Nourrit et cie, 1901. Bagnall S570. A Russian edition was published in St Petersburg in 1903 (*Na kraiu sveta. God v novo zelandi.* St Petersburg, O.N. Popovo) which presumably was available to Rusova. There is no English translation. Segur (1878-1918) was a member of a notable French aristocratic family who took to globetrotting around the turn of the century, spending four to five months in New Zealand.

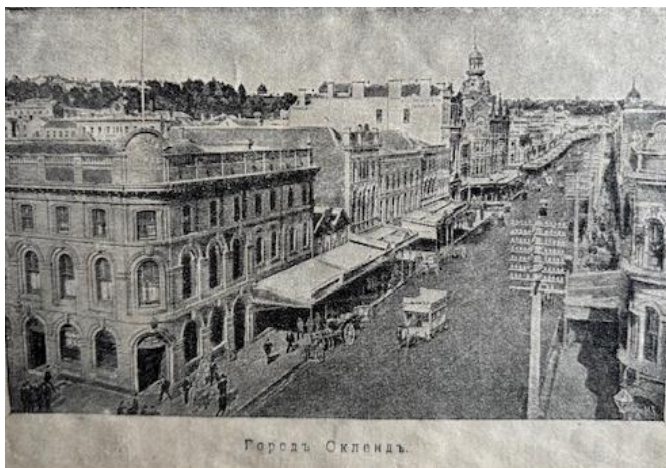
Rabbeno, Ugo. *La questione fondiaria nei paesi nuovi. Vol. 1. La questione fondiaria nelle grandi colonie dell' Australasia.* Pubblicato per cura di Achille Loria e Carlo A. Conigliani. Torino. Milano [etc.] fratelli Bocca Editori. 1898. Bagnall R1. [*The Land Question in the New Countries. Vol. 1. The Land Question in the Great Colonies of Australasia*]. Rabbeno (1863-1897) was an economist and advocate for the cooperative movement. His chapter on New Zealand was the 6th in a volume edited by Loria and Conigliani after Rabbeno's early death. It was derived from Rabbeno's visit to the Royal Colonial Institute in London, and was meant to be part of a larger work, but only Vol. 1 was ever published. It was translated into Russian as "Agrarnyi vopros v avstraliiskikh koloniiakh" in 1903 by Anna Ulyanova, the older sister of Vladimir Lenin. Rabbeno never visited New Zealand.

There are four plates in the book. One (p.42) is of a Māori Chief and is a copy of the well-known frontispiece in Hochstetter. The sources of the other three have not been identified. On p.19 is a photograph labelled City of Auckland, showing a familiar view up Queen Street at the turn of the century possibly taken from the Ferry building. On p.22 is a photo labelled Kauri, but is clearly a grove of nikau palms, and on p.40 there is a photo labelled Māori dwelling, showing some figures in front of a carved whare.

While Rusova's book can be considered a work of fiction, it is not a conventional story. The book is really a vehicle to describe turn of the century New Zealand and its modern, innovative development of a liberal social democracy, including a social welfare system, and



women's suffrage, products of Seddon's Government. She conceives of the young Ukrainian Levko having an uncle who had travelled earlier to New Zealand, married an Englishwoman, and settled there. Childless, he writes to Levko's impoverished family, asking if his nephew could come out and work with him and develop a life in the new country. After much weeping, the offer of the fare is accepted, though being a good son, Levko gives half to his mother, determined to work his passage. And so he boards an English steamer in Odessa bound (and not very likely so) for New Zealand. Right from the start, Rusova uses the voyage out to get in observations and comments on how in a short time (according to the English sailors) the country had developed from a wild place into a prosperous cultivated land, exporting frozen meat, and learning much about Māori and missionaries. She has a negative view of the Treaty, following a view then current among some anthropologists and liberal commentators that *'the Maori lost their independence for ever. This treaty, known as the Treaty of Waitangi, meant ruin for the Maori.'* Missionaries were part of the problem, persuading Māori to give up their land, and disease and poverty was killing off the race, *'dying silent and uncomplaining!'*



Levko arrives in Auckland and meets his uncle, amazed at a beautiful city and suburbs, and astonished that his uncle was farming ostriches. At first you wonder why Rusova should single out ostrich farming, surely the least of New Zealand's agricultural enterprises. But then on page 154 of Gaston De Ségur's 1901 book on New Zealand, which she cites, are two photographs of ostriches in their paddocks, followed by 3 or 4 pages of description of the

farm at Whitford run by the Nathan family. Ostriches were indeed farmed at Whitford and at Pukekohe from the 1880s through to the first decades of the next century. The current Ostrich Farm Road at Paerata is testament to it. Perhaps Rusova used this bit of exotica to enliven her rather prosaic work.

Rusova is able to provide much detailed information on New Zealand life and the economy by having the uncle relate his back story. He went gum digging up north (*'exports annually 6,000-8,000 tons of kauri gum, each ton worth 500-600 roubles'*), then worked for a South Island landowner, where workers here in New Zealand were not treated like animals, Rusova continually comparing conditions with those her readers would be familiar with in Tsarist Russia. She cites wages up to five times those for workers on the land, with meals; they don't have to drink vodka, and eat an average of 260 pounds of meat a year. There is much more, with statistics. Then the uncle tries gold mining without any luck, and back to Auckland, chastened by the failure to find easy money in the diggings. He buys a farm and produces fine, and lucrative, butter.

The uncle then surprisingly becomes an MP, and this allows Rusova to provide a great deal of information on the parliamentary system, votes for women, the economy and taxes, free schooling and a free press. Its like a socialist paradise, with the numbers to prove it, until

Levko accompanies his uncle on a trip to the kauri forests north of Auckland. There they find the other side of the picture, with Māori in wretched dwellings, reminiscing on their creation stories, lamenting their losses ‘*Our young men have grown weak, they do not wish to be tattooed...*’ ; ‘*The Christians teach us love, but why do they give us liquor to drink, why have they taught us to cheat and swindle?*’. They are either going to die out, or merge with the pakeha and lose their identity. The two then travel to Wellington, allowing more on the government systems, and then despite his uncle’s pleadings, Levko decides to return to Russia ‘*I shall bring to my native land all my enlightened ideas and youthful strength and shall work so that the happy time will soon come when the Russian worker too will breathe freely and easily and will come to understand what way of life is the happiest and fairest for all men.*’



So the *Fortunate Isles* indeed look that way, mostly, particularly from provincial Rostov in the depths of late Tsarist oppression. Goodliffe uses that title in his translation of Rusova, ‘*In the Fortunate Isles – Ao-Tea-Roa*’, and it is also the title of a Russian pamphlet by another Rostov historian in 1911, A. A. Titov (1844-1911)⁸. Here the country is depicted as a socialist, worker’s utopia. William Pember Reeves used the term in the title of a paper presented at the Royal Colonial Institute in London, May 1896⁹. The terminology *Fortunate Isles* itself is age-old, going back to Homer, associated with mythic islands in the Atlantic, winterless and blessed in all things. Remote, happy, fortunate? It’s all relative.



I bought Rusova’s book in 2020, from Bookvica, Tbilisi, Georgia, in association with Globus Books in San Francisco, specialists in Russian books. I also want to thank the gentleman running The Open Book shop in Ponsonby Rd, Auckland. When asking about Goodliffe’s monograph, I found that he had been a student of Goodliffe’s at Canterbury, and even had a copy, which he kindly scanned for me.

¹ Trollope, A. *Australia and New Zealand*. London, Chapman and Hall, 1873.

² <https://viviennemorrell.wordpress.com/2015/08/08/the-new-zealander-contemplates-the-ruins-of-london/>

³ Colenso, W. Three Literary papers read before the Hawke’s Bay Philosophical Institute, during the session of 1882. I and II on Nomenclature. III on Macaulay’s New Zealander. Napier, Daily Telegraph Office, 1883.

⁴ Chekhov, A.P. *Polnoye sobraniye sochineniy i pisem v 30-i tomakh* (Izd-o "Nauka", Moscow, 1974-), *Sochineniya*, vol. III, p. 342.

⁵ Verne, Jule. *Les Enfants du Capitaine Grant*. Paris, J. Hetzel, 1867-1868. English translations were *Among the cannibals* and *In search of the castaways*.

⁶ Internet Encyclopedia of Ukraine (taken from the Encyclopedia of Ukraine, vol. 4, 1993)

⁷ Goodliffe, J. D. *These Fortunate Isles : some Russian perceptions of New Zealand in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries*. Christchurch, Canterbury University Press, 1992. Goodliffe, J. D. *The image of New Zealand in Russia*. *New Zealand Slavonic Journal*, old series no. 12, Summer 1973, pp. 142-52. Goodliffe, J. D. *New Zealand through Russian eyes: the image improves*. *New Zealand Slavonic Journal*, No. 2, 1979, pp. 51-62.

⁸ Titov, A. A. *Schastlivye ostrova*. *Novaya Zelandiya*. Moscow, Moscow Literary Society, 1911. It is discussed by Goodliffe in ‘*The Fortunate Isles – New Zealand*’ and is not in Bagnall.

⁹ Reeves, William Pember. *The Fortunate Isles (Picturesque New Zealand)*. A paper contributed to The Proceedings of the Royal Colonial Institute, May 12, 1896. Wellington, Government Printer, 1897. Bagnall R397.